

Sink-or-Scuba Credo

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By DAVE LOVECCHIO
Tribune Sports Writer

Dale Eidson is going scuba diving in a couple of weeks which may come as a big surprise, if you remember his story.

On July 4 of last year a random spark in a can of four-year-old fireworks exploded Eidson's dream of playing pro football.

On the eve of his leaving for a tryout with the San Diego Chargers, Dale lost both legs and part of his right hand.

The 25-year-old San Francisco State graduate has obviously made many adjustments in the past year. They've only made Eidson a more determined man.

"I had to fight against having a negative attitude the whole time I was in the hospital," he said.

"But if you go through life saying 'I can't do it,' you won't do it. You have to be-



DALE EIDSON
Legless athlete

lieve that no matter how hard something is, it's still possible."

One of the things Dale is learning again is swimming. With the help of doctors at Letterman Hospital he is testing a new type of artificial legs especially suited to water.

The new leg made of fiberglass, foam and plastic, is the first one of its kind," Eidson says. "It hooks up on the top of the knee."

Scuba diving and swimming aren't the only activities keeping Eidson busy.

Since November he has worked part-time as a sportscaster for a radio station in Concord and just yesterday started selling insurance.

"I also dance once in a while and I play the drums. I've got a group called the Ty-Tones. We've been together for six years," he said.

Dale made up his mind soon after the accident to do for himself.

"I said I would be dancing

by the end of the year, playing the drums by February and be on my own," he said. "I've met every goal so far."

He lives alone in an apartment in Concord.

Why scuba diving, a new activity he starts June 15 at the Olympia Scuba School in Walnut Creek?

"I made up my mind to accept the fact that the accident happened and there's nothing I can do about it," he said. "Nothing will bring my legs back. You just make up your mind to do the best you can. That's the answer."

Eidson's message is still powerful

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In '71, he lost legs in fireworks accident

LISTEN CHILDREN. Listen closely. This isn't your parent's voice, with the same old boring Fourth of July warning about the danger of fooling with fireworks.

This is the voice of a fireworks victim, whose football career blew up in sulfur and smoke 25 years ago today.

You see, children, you can't kick field goals if you don't have any feet. So pay attention to Dale Eidson's message.

"I just hope they won't be another fireworks statistic and that I don't open the paper on July 5 and read about a backyard incident like the one that happened to me July 4, 1971. I hope they use common sense, because no fireworks are safe."

July 4, 1971. Eidson, of Concord, finally can say the date without cringing. Time heals the mind, if not always the



**Dave
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body. Eidson can recall how his body — and life — came apart that day.

"I didn't hear the explosion, but I remember sparks coming up into my face," he said. "I remember being lifted off the ground and seeing the roof of the house. I remember trying to stand up, and realizing that I didn't have anything to stand on."

Eidson had lost both legs below the knee. He nearly lost his right hand, but the thumb and little finger were saved.

"When I realized my legs were devastated I pounded the ground with my left hand and said, 'I blew it. I blew it.' I was thinking about football, not my legs."

Eidson, then 23, had kicked a school-record 48-yard field goal at San Francisco State. He was to leave in a few days for

the San Diego Chargers' training camp. Though a free agent, he was determined to succeed in the NFL if he didn't make it with the Chargers.

That's why his initial reaction was about football instead of his missing feet. Years of effort wasted, and now meaningless.

"I thought of all the discipline, the sacrifice, all the fun I had missed because of the training I was doing," he said. "My friends were out partying on a Friday night, and I was running the bleachers."

He wouldn't run normally again. Eight doctors worked through the night to save what was left of Dale Allen Eidson. While lapsing in and out of consciousness, he heard a priest give him last rites.

"The thing that saved me was that I was in the best shape of my life," Eidson said. "I was at the top of my game."

Taking that one risk, children, made him a double amputee.

"In the back of my head," Eidson recalled, "I said, 'Don't do anything stupid, like sprain an ankle or twist a



JAY SOLMONSON — Staff

Dave Eidson now is an umpire for youth baseball games.

Please see **Newhouse**, B-12

Inspiring youth games is Eidson's

... And here I almost blew myself to kingdom come."

That tragic day began with Eidson waxing his girlfriend's car. Then he set off some fireworks for a nephew and niece, both preschoolers, behind his parents' home in Concord.

Wanting a bigger thrill, Eidson found some aerial fireworks that he'd kept around the house since high school. They contained one-inch-round sulfur balls that would emit a rainbow of colors but wouldn't explode.

Not normally.

Eidson had put the sulfur balls in a galvanized milk container. He poured some on the ground, then lit them while his father and nephew watched. Eidson repeated the process, unaware the sulfur on the ground had become like hot charcoal. Sparks from the heated sulfur flew into the milk can in his right hand, igniting the remaining sulfur balls.

Though Eidson didn't hear the explosion, he learned later it was heard six miles away. A mushroom cloud from the scene was seen 1 1/2 miles away.

Eidson was lifted 10 feet into the air.

He landed six feet from the explosion. All the hair on his head was burned off. The next two months would be pure hell.

He had seven operations. Three times, the main artery in his withered right arm burst, putting him in danger of bleeding to death. He owed Concord Community Hospital much more, in gratitude, than the \$30,000 in medical expenses that were covered by his life-insurance policy.

Eidson is one of the most positive, purposeful people on earth. One year after his accident, he was driving his own car, swimming, scuba diving, playing the drums with both hands, and dancing to rock and roll.

These past 25 years, his life has been like a Grand Prix road race — an endless series of twists and turns.

He received a college degree in criminal counseling from Sacramento State, and worked three years in that field. He also worked for a district attorney, gave sports reports on a Concord radio station, engraved sports trophies and plaques, tried unsuccessfully to market a portable scoreboard, took a stab at songwriting, and benefited charities as a marathon swimmer.

He married twice. Neither worked out.

From his second marriage, he had a son, now almost 3, who lives with his mother near Grass Valley.

The one career move that stuck with Eidson was umpiring, a profession he now uses to augment his monthly government disability check.

Eidson attended the Jim Evans Umpiring School in Arizona five years ago. He works 10 months a year, weather-permitting, doing youth baseball in California, Nevada and Arizona.

Eidson believes if he had discovered umpiring in his early 20s, with normal legs he'd be in the big leagues today. He's 48.

"I can umpire rings around some of the guys up there," he said.

Eidson works behind home plate and on the bases, where he sets up behind the pitcher, to cut down on the amount of running he must do. Most of the time, the players don't know he has two artificial legs, or even one.

It's when Eidson works doubleheaders that his leg stumps really bother him, because he has to stand even between innings. The amount of leg pain he still feels depends on his activity level.

"The longer I stay off my prostheses, the longer I can stay on them," he said.

He schedules prostheses-free days, but they occur rarely. He's on his feet 12 to 14 hours most days, largely because it takes the disabled longer to do even the most mundane things.

"I love to do projects," said Eidson. "But it took me three weeks to fix someone's bathroom, where it would take someone else one week. There are times when I have self-anger. It's not so much my accident, but the self-frustration that comes from doing routine tasks.

"But one of the advantages (of working on a bathroom project though being disabled) is that I can crawl through tight places where I couldn't have gone with two legs."

What are other advantages?

"Society's awareness of the handicapped," Eidson replied. "This has evolved from the time of my accident."

And the main disadvantage?

"Mobility," he said. "My life is in slow motion. A normal guy gets dressed in five minutes. It takes me an hour."

This year, he wrote David Letterman about performing a "Stupid Human Trick" on his late-night television show. Eidson's idea? To balance a prosthesis on his nose. A Letterman producer then requested a videotape, which Eidson sent. He's awaiting a response.

new love

Eidson will spend the 25th anniversary of his accident umpiring an American Legion tournament in Carson City. He hasn't lit a firecracker in 25 years, and he likely won't again. However, he doesn't purposely avoid watching fireworks.

"The first few years after the accident, I'd get away," he said. "Recently I've been to fireworks shows at Great America. The first time, it brought tears to my eyes — a reflection of my situation. The next year, no impact."

How has Eidson changed the most mentally since July 4, 1971?

"I'm a much stronger person," he said. "Life's not easy. There are a lot of ups and downs. You have to choose what you want out of life and go for it."

"I don't look back much on what happened that day," he said, "though I have no qualms telling people how it happened. I just think it's a mistake I didn't get away with."

Don't make that same mistake, children.

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